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## Who Is Lying About Iraq?

*Norman Podhoretz*

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AMONG THE many distortions, misrepresentations, and outright falsifications that have emerged from the debate over Iraq, one in particular stands out above all others. This is the charge that George W. Bush misled us into an immoral and/or unnecessary war in Iraq by telling a series of lies that have now been definitively exposed.

What makes this charge so special is the amazing success it has enjoyed in getting itself established as a self-evident truth even though it has been refuted and discredited over and over again by evidence and argument alike. In this it resembles nothing so much as those animated cartoon characters who, after being flattened, blown up, or pushed over a cliff, always spring back to life with their bodies perfectly intact. Perhaps, like those cartoon characters, this allegation simply cannot be killed off, no matter what.

Nevertheless, I want to take one more shot at exposing it for the lie that it itself really is. Although doing so will require going over ground that I and many others have covered before, I hope that revis-

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iting this well-trodden terrain may also serve to refresh memories that have grown dim, to clarify thoughts that have grown confused, and to revive outrage that has grown commensurately dulled.

THE MAIN "lie" that George W. Bush is accused of telling us is that Saddam Hussein possessed an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, or WMD as they have invariably come to be called. From this followed the subsidiary "lie" that Iraq under Saddam's regime posed a two-edged mortal threat. On the one hand, we were informed, there was a distinct (or even "imminent") possibility that Saddam himself would use these weapons against us and/or our allies; and on the other hand, there was the still more dangerous possibility that he would supply them to terrorists like those who had already attacked us on 9/11 and to whom he was linked.

This entire scenario of purported deceit has been given a new lease on life by the indictment in late October of I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby, then chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney. Libby stands accused of making false statements to the FBI and of committing perjury in testifying before a grand jury that had been convened to find out who in the Bush administration had "outed" Valerie Plame, a CIA agent married to the retired ambassador Joseph C. Wilson, IV. The supposed purpose of leaking this classified information to the press was to retaliate against Wilson for hav-

ing “debunked” (in his words) “the lies that led to war.”

Now, as it happens, Libby was not charged with having outed Plame but only of having lied about when and from whom he first learned that she worked for the CIA. Moreover, Patrick J. Fitzgerald, the special prosecutor who brought the indictment against him, made a point of emphasizing that

[t]his indictment is not about the war. This indictment is not about the propriety of the war. And people who believe fervently in the war effort, people who oppose it, people who have mixed feelings about it should not look to this indictment for any resolution of how they feel or any vindication of how they feel.

This is simply an indictment that says, in a national-security investigation about the compromise of a CIA officer’s identity that may have taken place in the context of a very heated debate over the war, whether some person—a person, Mr. Libby—lied or not.

No matter. Harry Reid, the Democratic leader in the Senate, spoke for a host of other opponents of the war in insisting that

[t]his case is bigger than the leak of classified information. It is about how the Bush White House manufactured and manipulated intelligence in order to bolster its case for the war in Iraq and to discredit anyone who dared to challenge the President.

Yet even stipulating—which I do only for the sake of argument—that no weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq in the period leading up to the invasion, it defies all reason to think that Bush was lying when he asserted that they did. To lie means to say something one knows to be false. But it is as close to certainty as we can get that Bush believed in the truth of what he was saying about WMD in Iraq.

How indeed could it have been otherwise? George Tenet, his own CIA director, assured him that the case was “a slam dunk.” This phrase would later become notorious, but in using it, Tenet had the backing of all fifteen agencies involved in gathering intelligence for the United States. In the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of 2002, where their collective views were summarized, one of the conclusions offered with “high confidence” was that

Iraq is continuing, and in some areas expand-

ing its chemical, biological, nuclear, and missile programs contrary to UN resolutions.

The intelligence agencies of Britain, Germany, Russia, China, Israel, and—yes—France all agreed with this judgment. And even Hans Blix—who headed the UN team of inspectors trying to determine whether Saddam had complied with the demands of the Security Council that he get rid of the weapons of mass destruction he was known to have had in the past—lent further credibility to the case in a report he issued only a few months before the invasion:

The discovery of a number of 122-mm chemical rocket warheads in a bunker at a storage depot 170 km southwest of Baghdad was much publicized. This was a relatively new bunker, and therefore the rockets must have been moved there in the past few years, at a time when Iraq should not have had such munitions. . . . They could also be the tip of a submerged iceberg. The discovery of a few rockets does not resolve but rather points to the issue of several thousands of chemical rockets that are unaccounted for.

Blix now claims that he was only being “cautious” here, but if, as he now also adds, the Bush administration “mised itself” in interpreting the evidence before it, he at the very least lent it a helping hand.

SO, ONCE again, did the British, the French, and the Germans, all of whom signed on in advance to Secretary of State Colin Powell’s reading of the satellite photos he presented to the UN in the period leading up to the invasion. Powell himself and his chief of staff, Lawrence Wilkerson, now feel that this speech was the low point of his tenure as Secretary of State. But Wilkerson (in the process of a vicious attack on the President, the Vice President, and the Secretary of Defense for getting us into Iraq) is forced to acknowledge that the Bush administration did not lack for company in interpreting the available evidence as it did:

I can’t tell you why the French, the Germans, the Brits, and us thought that most of the material, if not all of it, that we presented at the UN on 5 February 2003 was the truth. I can’t. I’ve wrestled with it. [But] when you see a satellite photograph of all the signs of the chemical-weapons ASP—Ammunition Supply Point—with chemical weapons, and you match all those signs with your matrix on what should show a chemical ASP, and they’re there, you

have to conclude that it's a chemical ASP, especially when you see the next satellite photograph which shows the UN inspectors wheeling in their white vehicles with black markings on them to that same ASP, and everything is changed, everything is clean. . . . But George [Tenet] was convinced, John McLaughlin [Tenet's deputy] was convinced, that what we were presented [for Powell's UN speech] was accurate.

Going on to shoot down a widespread impression, Wilkerson informs us that even the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) was convinced:

People say, well, INR dissented. That's a bunch of bull. INR dissented that the nuclear program was up and running. That's all INR dissented on. They were right there with the chems and the bios.

In explaining its dissent on Iraq's nuclear program, the INR had, as stated in the NIE of 2002, expressed doubt about

Iraq's efforts to acquire aluminum tubes [which are] central to the argument that Baghdad is reconstituting its nuclear-weapons program. . . . INR is not persuaded that the tubes in question are intended for use as centrifuge rotors . . . in Iraq's nuclear-weapons program.

But, according to Wilkerson,

The French came in in the middle of my deliberations at the CIA and said, we have just spun aluminum tubes, and by God, we did it to this RPM, et cetera, et cetera, and it was all, you know, proof positive that the aluminum tubes were not for mortar casings or artillery casings, they were for centrifuges. Otherwise, why would you have such exquisite instruments?

In short, and whether or not it included the secret heart of Hans Blix, "the consensus of the intelligence community," as Wilkerson puts it, "was overwhelming" in the period leading up to the invasion of Iraq that Saddam definitely had an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, and that he was also in all probability well on the way to rebuilding the nuclear capability that the Israelis had damaged by bombing the Osirak reactor in 1981.

Additional confirmation of this latter point comes from Kenneth Pollack, who served in the National Security Council under Clinton. "In the late spring of 2002," Pollack has written,

I participated in a Washington meeting about Iraqi WMD. Those present included nearly twenty former inspectors from the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the force established in 1991 to oversee the elimination of WMD in Iraq. One of the senior people put a question to the group: did anyone in the room doubt that Iraq was currently operating a secret centrifuge plant? No one did. Three people added that they believed Iraq was also operating a secret calutron plant (a facility for separating uranium isotopes).

No wonder, then, that another conclusion the NIE of 2002 reached with "high confidence" was that

Iraq could make a nuclear weapon in months to a year once it acquires sufficient weapons-grade fissile material.<sup>1</sup>

**B**UT THE consensus on which Bush relied was not born in his own administration. In fact, it was first fully formed in the Clinton administration. Here is Clinton himself, speaking in 1998:

If Saddam rejects peace and we have to use force, our purpose is clear. We want to seriously diminish the threat posed by Iraq's weapons-of-mass-destruction program.

Here is his Secretary of State Madeline Albright, also speaking in 1998:

Iraq is a long way from [the USA], but what happens there matters a great deal here. For the risk that the leaders of a rogue state will use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons against us or our allies is the greatest security threat we face.

Here is Sandy Berger, Clinton's National Security Adviser, who chimed in at the same time with this flat-out assertion about Saddam:

He will use those weapons of mass destruction again, as he has ten times since 1983.

Finally, Clinton's Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, was so sure Saddam had stockpiles of WMD that he remained "absolutely convinced" of

<sup>1</sup> Hard as it is to believe, let alone to reconcile with his general position, Joseph C. Wilson, IV, in a speech he delivered three months after the invasion at the Education for Peace in Iraq Center, offhandedly made the following remark: "I remain of the view that we will find biological and chemical weapons and we may well find something that indicates that Saddam's regime maintained an interest in nuclear weapons."

it even after our failure to find them in the wake of the invasion in March 2003.

Nor did leading Democrats in Congress entertain any doubts on this score. A few months after Clinton and his people made the statements I have just quoted, a group of Democratic Senators, including such liberals as Carl Levin, Tom Daschle, and John Kerry, urged the President

to take necessary actions (including, if appropriate, air and missile strikes on suspect Iraqi sites) to respond effectively to the threat posed by Iraq's refusal to end its weapons-of-mass-destruction programs.

Nancy Pelosi, the future leader of the Democrats in the House, and then a member of the House Intelligence Committee, added her voice to the chorus:

Saddam Hussein has been engaged in the development of weapons-of-mass-destruction technology, which is a threat to countries in the region, and he has made a mockery of the weapons inspection process.

This Democratic drumbeat continued and even intensified when Bush succeeded Clinton in 2001, and it featured many who would later pretend to have been deceived by the Bush White House. In a letter to the new President, a number of Senators led by Bob Graham declared:

There is no doubt that . . . Saddam Hussein has invigorated his weapons programs. Reports indicate that biological, chemical, and nuclear programs continue apace and may be back to pre-Gulf war status. In addition, Saddam continues to redefine delivery systems and is doubtless using the cover of a licit missile program to develop longer-range missiles that will threaten the United States and our allies.

Senator Carl Levin also reaffirmed for Bush's benefit what he had told Clinton some years earlier:

Saddam Hussein is a tyrant and a threat to the peace and stability of the region. He has ignored the mandate of the United Nations, and is building weapons of mass destruction and the means of delivering them.

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton agreed, speaking in October 2002:

In the four years since the inspectors left, intelligence reports show that Saddam Hussein has worked to rebuild his chemical- and biological-weapons stock, his missile-delivery capability, and his nuclear program. He has also

given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members.

Senator Jay Rockefeller, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, agreed as well:

There is unmistakable evidence that Saddam Hussein is working aggressively to develop nuclear weapons and will likely have nuclear weapons within the next five years. . . . We also should remember we have always underestimated the progress Saddam has made in development of weapons of mass destruction.

Even more striking were the sentiments of Bush's opponents in his two campaigns for the presidency. Thus Al Gore in September 2002:

We know that [Saddam] has stored secret supplies of biological and chemical weapons throughout his country.

And here is Gore again, in that same year:

Iraq's search for weapons of mass destruction has proven impossible to deter, and we should assume that it will continue for as long as Saddam is in power.

Now to John Kerry, also speaking in 2002:

I will be voting to give the President of the United States the authority to use force—if necessary—to disarm Saddam Hussein because I believe that a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in his hands is a real and grave threat to our security.

**P**ERHAPS MOST startling of all, given the rhetoric that they would later employ against Bush after the invasion of Iraq, are statements made by Senators Ted Kennedy and Robert Byrd, also in 2002:

*Kennedy:* We have known for many years that Saddam Hussein is seeking and developing weapons of mass destruction.

*Byrd:* The last UN weapons inspectors left Iraq in October of 1998. We are confident that Saddam Hussein retains some stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, and that he has since embarked on a crash course to build up his chemical- and biological-warfare capabilities. Intelligence reports indicate that he is seeking nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Fuller versions of these and similar statements can be found at <http://www.theconversationcafe.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-3134.html> and. Another source is <http://www.rightwingnews.com/quotes/demsonwmds.php>.

Liberal politicians like these were seconded by the mainstream media, in whose columns a very different tune would later be sung. For example, throughout the last two years of the Clinton administration, editorials in the *New York Times* repeatedly insisted that

without further outside intervention, Iraq should be able to rebuild weapons and missile plants within a year [and] future military attacks may be required to diminish the arsenal again.

The *Times* was also skeptical of negotiations, pointing out that it was

hard to negotiate with a tyrant who has no intention of honoring his commitments and who sees nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons as his country's salvation.

So, too, the *Washington Post*, which greeted the inauguration of George W. Bush in January 2001 with the admonition that

[o]f all the booby traps left behind by the Clinton administration, none is more dangerous—or more urgent—than the situation in Iraq. Over the last year, Mr. Clinton and his team quietly avoided dealing with, or calling attention to, the almost complete unraveling of a decade's efforts to isolate the regime of Saddam Hussein and prevent it from rebuilding its weapons of mass destruction. That leaves President Bush to confront a dismaying panorama in the Persian Gulf [where] intelligence photos . . . show the reconstruction of factories long suspected of producing chemical and biological weapons.<sup>3</sup>

ALL THIS should surely suffice to prove far beyond any even unreasonable doubt that Bush was telling what he believed to be the truth about Saddam's stockpile of WMD. It also disposes of the fallback charge that Bush lied by exaggerating or hyping the intelligence presented to him. Why on earth would he have done so when the intelligence itself was so compelling that it convinced everyone who had direct access to it, and when hardly anyone in the world believed that Saddam had, as he claimed, complied with the sixteen resolutions of the Security Council demanding that he get rid of his weapons of mass destruction?

Another fallback charge is that Bush, operating mainly through Cheney, somehow forced the CIA into telling him what he wanted to hear. Yet in its

report of 2004, the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee, while criticizing the CIA for relying on what in hindsight looked like weak or faulty intelligence, stated that it

did not find any evidence that administration officials attempted to coerce, influence, or pressure analysts to change their judgments related to Iraq's weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities.

The March 2005 report of the equally bipartisan Robb-Silberman commission, which investigated intelligence failures on Iraq, reached the same conclusion, finding

no evidence of political pressure to influence the intelligence community's pre-war assessments of Iraq's weapons programs. . . . [A]nalytists universally asserted that in no instance did political pressure cause them to skew or alter any of their analytical judgments.

Still, even many who believed that Saddam did possess WMD, and was ruthless enough to use them, accused Bush of telling a different sort of lie by characterizing the risk as "imminent." But this, too, is false: Bush consistently *rejected* imminence as a justification for war.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the State of the Union address he delivered only three months after 9/11, Bush declared that he would "not wait on events while dangers gather" and that he would "not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer." Then, in a speech at West Point six months later, he reiterated the same point: "If we wait for threats to materialize, we will have waited too long." And as if that were not clear enough, he went out of his way in his State of the Union address in 2003 (that is, three months before the invasion), to bring up the word "imminent" itself precisely in order to repudiate it:

Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent. Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike? If this threat is permitted to fully and suddenly emerge, all actions, all words, and all recriminations would come too late. Trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy, and it is not an option.

<sup>3</sup> These and numerous other such quotations were assembled by Robert Kagan in a piece published in the *Washington Post* on October 25, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas both John Edwards, later to become John Kerry's running mate in 2004, and Jay Rockefeller, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, actually did use the word in describing the threat posed by Saddam.

What of the related charge that it was still another “lie” to suggest, as Bush and his people did, that a connection could be traced between Saddam Hussein and the al-Qaeda terrorists who had attacked us on 9/11? This charge was also rejected by the Senate Intelligence Committee. Contrary to how its findings were summarized in the mainstream media, the committee’s report explicitly concluded that al-Qaeda did in fact have a cooperative, if informal, relationship with Iraqi agents working under Saddam. The report of the bipartisan 9/11 commission came to the same conclusion, as did a comparably independent British investigation conducted by Lord Butler, which pointed to “meetings . . . between senior Iraqi representatives and senior al-Qaeda operatives.”<sup>5</sup>

WHICH BRINGS us to Joseph C. Wilson, IV and what to my mind wins the palm for the most disgraceful instance of all.

The story begins with the notorious sixteen words inserted—after, be it noted, much vetting by the CIA and the State Department—into Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address:

The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.

This is the “lie” Wilson bragged of having “debunked” after being sent by the CIA to Niger in 2002 to check out the intelligence it had received to that effect. Wilson would later angrily deny that his wife had recommended him for this mission, and would do his best to spread the impression that choosing him had been the Vice President’s idea. But Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, through whom Wilson first planted this impression, was eventually forced to admit that “Cheney apparently didn’t know that Wilson had been dispatched.” (By the time Kristof grudgingly issued this retraction, Wilson himself, in characteristically shameless fashion, was denying that he had ever “said the Vice President sent me or ordered me sent.”) And as for his wife’s supposed non-role in his mission, here is what Valerie Plame Wilson wrote in a memo to her boss at the CIA:

My husband has good relations with the PM [the prime minister of Niger] and the former minister of mines . . . , both of whom could possibly shed light on this sort of activity.

More than a year after his return, with the help of Kristof, and also Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*, and then through an op-ed piece in the *Times* under his own name, Wilson succeeded,

probably beyond his wildest dreams, in setting off a political firestorm.

In response, the White House, no doubt hoping to prevent his allegation about the sixteen words from becoming a proxy for the charge that (in Wilson’s latest iteration of it) “lies and disinformation [were] used to justify the invasion of Iraq,” eventually acknowledged that the President’s statement “did not rise to the level of inclusion in the State of the Union address.” As might have been expected, however, this panicky response served to make things worse rather than better. And yet it was totally unnecessary—for the maddeningly simple reason that every single one of the sixteen words at issue was *true*.

That is, British intelligence *had* assured the CIA that Saddam Hussein had tried to buy enriched uranium from the African country of Niger. Furthermore—and notwithstanding the endlessly repeated assertion that this assurance has now been discredited—Britain’s independent Butler commission concluded that it was “well-founded.” The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

a. It is accepted by all parties that Iraqi officials visited Niger in 1999.

b. The British government had intelligence from several different sources indicating that this visit was for the purpose of acquiring uranium. Since uranium constitutes almost three-quarters of Niger’s exports, the intelligence was credible.

c. The evidence was not conclusive that Iraq actually purchased, as opposed to having sought, uranium, and the British government did not claim this.

AS IF that were not enough to settle the matter, Wilson himself, far from challenging the British report when he was “debriefed” on his return from Niger (although challenging it is what he now never stops doing<sup>6</sup>), actually strengthened the CIA’s belief in its accuracy. From the Senate Intelligence Committee report:

<sup>5</sup> In early November, the Democrats on the Senate Intelligence Committee, who last year gave their unanimous assent to its report, were suddenly mounting a last-ditch effort to take it back on this issue (and others). But to judge from the material they had already begun leaking by November 7, when this article was going to press, the newest “Bush lied” case is as empty and dishonest as the one they themselves previously rejected.

<sup>6</sup> Here is how he put it in a piece in the *Los Angeles Times* written in late October of this year to celebrate the indictment of Libby: “I knew that the statement in Bush’s speech . . . was not true. I knew it was false from my own investigative trip to Africa. . . . And I knew that the White House knew it.”

He [the CIA reports officer] said he judged that the most important fact in the report [by Wilson] was that Niger officials admitted that the Iraqi delegation had traveled there in 1999, and that the Niger prime minister believed the Iraqis were interested in purchasing uranium.

And again:

The report on [Wilson's] trip to Niger . . . did not change any analysts' assessments of the Iraq-Niger uranium deal. For most analysts, the information in the report lent more credibility to the original CIA reports on the uranium deal.

This passage goes on to note that the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research—which (as we have already seen) did not believe that Saddam Hussein was trying to develop nuclear weapons—found support in Wilson's report for its “assessment that Niger was unlikely to be willing or able to sell uranium to Iraq.” But if so, this, as the Butler report quoted above points out, would not mean that Iraq had not *tried* to buy it—which was the only claim made by British intelligence and then by Bush in the famous sixteen words.

The liar here, then, was not Bush but Wilson. And Wilson also lied when he told the *Washington Post* that he had unmasked as forgeries certain documents given to American intelligence (by whom it is not yet clear) that supposedly contained additional evidence of Saddam's efforts to buy uranium from Niger. The documents did indeed turn out to be forgeries; but, according to the Butler report,

[t]he forged documents were not available to the British government at the time its assessment was made, and so the fact of the forgery does not undermine [that assessment].<sup>7</sup>

More damning yet to Wilson, the Senate Intelligence Committee discovered that he had never laid eyes on the documents in question:

[Wilson] also told committee staff that he was the source of a *Washington Post* article . . . which said, “among the envoy's conclusions was that the documents may have been forged because ‘the dates were wrong and the names were wrong.’” Committee staff asked how the former ambassador could have come to the conclusion that the “dates were wrong and the names were wrong” when he had never seen the CIA reports and had no knowledge of what names and dates were in the reports.

To top all this off, just as Cheney had nothing to

do with the choice of Wilson for the mission to Niger, neither was it true that, as Wilson “confirmed” for a credulous *New Republic* reporter, “the CIA circulated [his] report to the Vice President's office,” thereby supposedly proving that Cheney and his staff “knew the Niger story was a flatout lie.” Yet—the mind reels—if Cheney had actually been briefed on Wilson's oral report to the CIA (which he was not), he would, like the CIA itself, have been *more* inclined to believe that Saddam had tried to buy yellowcake uranium from Niger.

So much for the author of the best-selling and much acclaimed book whose title alone—*The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies that Led to War and Betrayed My Wife's CIA Identity*—has set a new record forchutzpah.

**B**UT THERE is worse. In his press conference on the indictment against Libby, Patrick Fitzgerald insisted that lying to federal investigators is a serious crime both because it is itself against the law and because, by sending them on endless wild-goose chases, it constitutes the even more serious crime of obstruction of justice. By those standards, Wilson—who has repeatedly made false statements about every aspect of his mission to Niger, including whose idea it was to send him and what he told the CIA upon his return; who was then shown up by the Senate Intelligence Committee as having lied about the forged documents; and whose mendacity has sent the whole country into a wild-goose chase after allegations that, the more they are refuted, the more they keep being repeated—is himself an excellent candidate for criminal prosecution.

And so long as we are hunting for liars in this area, let me suggest that we begin with the Democrats now proclaiming that they were duped, and that we then broaden out to all those who in their desperation to delegitimize the larger policy being tested in Iraq—the policy of making the Middle East safe for America by making it safe for democracy—have consistently used distortion, misrepresentation, and selective perception to vilify as immoral a bold and noble enterprise and to brand as an ignominious defeat what is proving itself more and more every day to be a victory of American arms and a vindication of American ideals.

—November 7, 2005

<sup>7</sup> More extensive citations of the relevant passages from the Butler report can be found in postings by Daniel McGivern at [www.worldwidestandard.com](http://www.worldwidestandard.com). I have also drawn throughout on materials cited by the invaluable Stephen F. Hayes in the *Weekly Standard*.